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Taking a Second Look: Following Surveys with Students' Descriptions of the Culture
of Aggression in a Middle School

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Abstract

This article describes a research study on aggressive behaviour among students in a middle school¹. The study was initiated in response to concern about aggressive behaviour held by the school administration. A survey on aggressive behaviour was administered and followed by interviews with a sample of students. Student interviews highlighted a number of very important issues to consider when assessing and responding to aggressive behaviour in a school: school crowding, the playing out of dominant masculinity, involving students in finding solutions to identified problems, and considering the role of the whole school culture in sustaining aggressive behaviour.

Keywords: aggressive behaviour, competition, social interdependence, school belonging

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Introduction

Whitmer (1997) has suggested that aggression represents a failure of relationship. Relationships within a school are complex and include interpersonal relationships between students, between groups of students, between students and teachers, between teachers, between administrators, between administrators and teachers, between administrators and students, and relationships between administrators, teachers, and students. Relationships within schools are influenced by what people know about each other, but also what they believe to be true. Similarly, relationships are influenced by a mindset that develops within a school culture.

In the case of the middle school at the centre of this inquiry, the researchers were invited into the school because the administrators had concerns about the level of aggressive behaviour within their grade eight student group. Understanding a complex issue such as youthful aggression within complex environments such as schools requires the application of a broad sociocultural lens (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997) to illuminate some of the context-dependent motives, reasons, and values behind aggressive behaviour (Ogilvie, 1996). The concept of social interdependence provides a helpful way to inquire into the complex web of relationships within a school culture that may influence aggressive behaviour.

Background Literature

Social interdependence reflects the extent to which students perceive people needing and depending on one another. Social interdependence is said to exist in a group when common goals are shared and each person's outcomes are affected by the actions of others (Johnson & Johnson, 1998; Magnuson, 1999). The concept of social interdependence promotes a needs-based orientation to problem behaviour that suggests that problematic behaviours arise out of unmet needs. The unmet needs that

are typically included in explanations for problem behaviour are belonging, autonomy, and competence (Anderman, 2003; Baker & Bridger, 1997; Battistich, Solomon, Watson & Schaps, 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998; Caraway, Tucker, Reinke & Hall, 2003; Schaps, 2002).

As students move from elementary to middle school, they are more likely to be in a school environment that is less supportive of their needs for belonging, autonomy, and competence (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Experiences with cooperation are important for students to achieve a sense of belonging at school (Battistich, et al., 1997; Natvig, Albrektsen and Qvarnström, 2003; Schaps, 2002). One way that schools neglect to address student needs for belonging is by structuring classes and schools in ways that promote competition rather than cooperation (e.g., reward ceremonies that celebrate only individual achievement) (Pelligrini, 2002). Competition serves to bolster dominant masculinity, and both males and females find it hard to resist the acceptance and illusion of safety that accompanies the assertion of power and strength (Mills, 2001). Yamaguchi (2001) also states that when competition to do better than others is valued over individual improvement in learning, people will find it virtually impossible to cooperate, engage in effective communication, or collaborate – in essence, they will be unable to have an experience with social interdependence. Finally, teacher relationships with students are critical to establishing a climate conducive to belonging. Chang (2003) found that teachers who were warm and supportive of all students promoted a culture of acceptance between students in their classrooms.

Schools neglect student needs for autonomy and competence by placing a high priority on control (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). When schools emphasize control inside and outside the classroom, students are likely to feel less important to

teachers and administrators than the structural demands of running a school (Beck and Malley, 1998). Fallis and Opatow (2003) found that student disengagement in school is often a response to their concerns not being taken seriously. Baker and Bridger (1997) state that many "discipline" problems in schools are linked to a lack of opportunity to experience autonomy and competence and can be prevented by ensuring that students have a legitimate voice within the school community.

This study, in taking a needs-based approach to investigating students' problem behaviour does not focus on determining what prosocial skills students lack, but rather, attends to "the reasons, values, and motives that give rise to those behaviours" (Kohn, 2004, p.35).

The Study

An initial picture of aggression in the middle school was obtained by administering a survey – the *Survey of Student Life* – a revised version of an self-report instrument used in previous investigations into the relationship between various factors and the use of aggression and violence (Artz & Riecken, 1994; Artz, Riecken, MacIntyre, Lam & Maczewski, 1998)². Cronbach's alpha values were computed for each subscale on the survey and the alpha values met the .75 cutoff on each comparison. Support exists in the literature for self-reports as a basis for establishing incidence rates (see, for example, Alder & Worall, 2004; Doob & Cesaroni 2004; Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1981; Sprott & Doob, 2004).

The interviews focused on asking students to elaborate upon their responses to key items on the surveys (i.e., those items that were shown in preliminary analyses of the surveys, to be highly related to the use of aggression – that is, moral attitudes,

² A description of the entire survey can be made available by contacting the author.

experiences with aggression and victimization, the role of emotions; competition, cooperation, school discouragement/encouragement, and school belonging). The interview questions were all open-ended and when necessary, students were probed to elicit an elaboration on their responses.

The School

The middle school in this study is a comprehensive school of approximately 700 students in grades 7-9. The student body is mainly Caucasian, with approximately 25 First Nations students (approximately 4% of the entire student population). The split within the school is close to equal between boys and girls. This school has been in operation for over 35 years.

Survey Administration

Prior to administering the survey in the school, consent was obtained from parents and students. Students were assigned a 5-digit alphanumeric code to protect their anonymity. The surveys were administered to all the grade eight classes and two a random sampling of the grade seven classes in February 2-3, 2004. The survey took students between 45 and 60 minutes to complete.

Survey Sample

The participating school asked that half of the grade 7 and all the grade 8 classes participate in the survey administration. The school reported being particularly concerned with their cohort of grade 8 students, deeming them "the worst" group of students in the history of the school. The school administrators were hopeful that the research would provide information about this group of students that could be utilized to help address the problem of aggressive behaviour at school. Total participation among the grade eight students was 88 percent of the total grade eight

population, and a sampling of the grade 7 population (27% of the total grade seven population). Most of the students (85%) were between 12 and 13 years of age.

Interview Administration

Student volunteers for the interviews were obtained using a form attached to the surveys. The interviews were scheduled to commence immediately after school and took place in a private room at the school. Before commencing the interview, students were again asked for their informed consent to participate. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Students who participated in an individual interview were awarded a \$20 honorarium to thank them for their time.

Interview Sample

Purposive sampling was used to select students from among those students who volunteered to participate in individual interviews. Of the 41 students (24 females and 17 males) who volunteered to be interviewed, 3 females and 7 males were "hitters" as identified by their survey responses (i.e., they had reported "beating up another kid in the past year") (see Table 1). As we were most interested in talking to students who used physical aggression (recall the school administration's particular interest in one group of students), I called these students first for interviews. We also strove to achieve a balance between female and male participants. In the end, interviews were conducted with 5 female students (2 "hitters" and 3 "non-hitters"), and 5 male students (3 "hitters" and 2 "non-hitters"). The interviews were conducted in the Fall of 2004 when the students were in grade nine (see table 1).

Survey Analysis

Aggression has long been considered a non-unitary construct (Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders, 2000). Thus, aggression in this study included the assessment of physical, sexual, and relational aggression.

Physical aggression was assessed as the first of the three forms of aggression. Students, in responding affirmatively to the question, "during the past year, how often have you beaten up another kid?"³ were categorized as "hitters" while students who reported "never" to this question were categorized as "non-hitters" (see Table 1 for frequencies).

Sexual aggression/harassment was determined using 3 items that reflect the use of sexually aggressive and sexually harassing behaviours: "In the last month at school, how many times have you: d) sexually harassed a boy/girl?, k) Put down a boy/girl for being gay, l) Put down a boy/girl by calling them 'gay', 'queer', 'lesbian', or 'fag'?"

Relational aggression was determined using 7 items that reflect the use of more indirect forms of aggression: "In the last month at school, how many times have you... a) Called a boy/girl an inappropriate name?, b) Used obscene language to a boy/girl?, e) Damaged something that belonged to a boy/girl?, g) Stole something from a boy/girl?, h) Blackmailed a boy/girl?, i) Spread rumours about a boy/girl?, j) Excluded or shunned a boy/girl?"

Interview Analysis

The interview questions served to direct students' attention toward the object of our study – that is, the phenomenon of aggressive behaviour – and by doing so, enabled

³ The question used to categorize students as either "hitters" or "non-hitters" had been used in 1993 and 1998 in the earlier version of the *Survey of Student Life*, and had also been used in research by Jessor and Jessor (1977) and Barnes (1991) in that format.

sufficient description of the causes, purposes, and grounds for aggressive behaviour as contained in students' lived experiences (Moran, 2000). Numerous readings of the transcripts enabled me to create a vision of the phenomenon of aggression in students' lives and develop typologies of their perceptions and experiences (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Quotes that best reflect the perceptions and experiences of students were highlighted for inclusion in reporting in order to enhance readers' ability to determine the "transferability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the findings, and to highlight the meanings that students hold for the culture of aggression within the school (Creswell, 1998).

Survey Results

Mean scores for the three types of aggression were computed and then, in order to examine whether any significant sex differences existed with respect to girls' and boys' engagement in the use of each form of aggression, t-test analyses were performed on mean scores (see Table 2). Male respondents reported significantly higher use of physical, relational and sexual aggression/harassment than did female respondents (see Table 2). Table 2 also shows that both male and female students have higher mean scores for using physical aggression than they do for using either sexual aggression/harassment or relational aggression.

Interview Findings

By describing their experiences with competition, cooperation, feelings of belonging, encouragement and discouragement at school, students highlight the relationship between their needs for belonging, autonomy, and competence and the use of aggressive behaviour.

Competing for Dominance

Students describe a school environment in which students watch and critically evaluate one another. A hierarchy of status existed between the popular group of students (e.g., the "popular" group which consisted of approximately 15 to 25 grade 9 students⁴, mostly male) and the remainder of the student body. Students described striving to assert dominance through competition. Students often take the first step to make fun of other students in order to ward off being made fun of by others. The opinions of some students are expressed openly while other students keep their opinions and beliefs to themselves in order to avoid being put-down by others.

If you're not very popular, they'll [the popular kids] will just go along with the opinion and say 'Oh, you don't have a say in this' and if there is a popular person around and they want to make a rule, they'll say, 'Hey, do you think this is a good rule?' (male "non-hitter")

I think to be powerful would be to have control over your group almost. Like having them want to be like you, act like you, talk like you. ...It's almost like a safety blanket if you're in control [of a group] because you know no one will mess with you. (male "hitter").

Dominance is achieved through having as many friends as possible. For boys, dominance is also achieved via size and proving physical strength. Girls are said to obtain dominance through being pretty enough to get the popular boys for boyfriends or through verbal strength, or "word power." Dominance, in the views of the students, is synonymous with the power to intimidate others.

[A dominant person] won't step down if there is a problem. Someone who will take it on the nose. (male "hitter")

⁴ the grade 8 cohort that was of interest to the school administration had just begun grade 9 when the interviews were conducted

[A dominant girl is] whoever has the bigger mouth, whoever can argue the longest or the most. Usually the longest is the more dominant. ...[Or] girls usually have the bigger group of friends. (male "hitter")

Interestingly, while the ability to assert dominance was said to act as a protective factor against aggression from outside the dominant or "popular" group, males within "the group" were also reported to engage in physical fights with one another. Although male fighting within the dominant group was usually described as play fighting, some students reported observing "play fights" that appeared to inflict harm.

The thing is like some of my friends are in the group that picks on me but they don't really do anything or say anything because like the group is intimidating because it's a fairly big group. It's, I don't know, like, it's like once you're in the group, you're popular ...people don't want to leave the group. They just take whatever. (male "hitter")

I even saw one [fight] in the hall today and the guy who was telling him to stop was almost like crying because he said his stomach was hurting. ...They're actually part of that big group [of popular kids], they're friends. (female "hitter")

Most of the students who were interviewed were aware of the play fighting that the males participated in (e.g., dueling, daddy-fights, and shower fights) and commented on it in ways that indicated varying degrees of acceptance. Overall, students suggested that play fighting between males – even if they thought it was stupid or a sign of "immaturity," as some girls stated – was an inevitable outlet for males to assert their strength and power over one another.

I think it [play fighting] is just fine, like you're not hurting anybody, you're just, just not as much, you're just packing each other, you're not punching them in the face or beating them and stuff. (male "hitter")

There was this thing that kids like to do and it's called dueling and what it is, it's like a fight but there's no face shots. ...It's just to see how big and tough you are it seems like. ... A lot of people don't do it and they're still treated as a normal person but some people just do it to have fun. (male "hitter")

Just like daddy fights or shower fights ... it's just like all, dueling is the same thing. It's just a friendly fight I guess. [Interviewer: Would you like to see it end?] Yes and no. It may sound weird but I've only seen one [fight]. I don't know but I kind of liked it. I didn't want to see anyone get hurt but it was kind of a rush almost ... like I felt I was glued to the floor but then I finally got out of there. (male "hitter")

The competition for power that is acted out through exhibitions of physical strength within male 'friendships' also features among friendships between girls although the means for asserting power are reported to differ somewhat from those used by boys. For example, the "popular girls" call other girls "slut, ho, bitch, fat", mostly to discourage girls from trying to get guys' attention. Other means used to assert power over other girls include sharing information learned in confidence and teasing.

While the students who were interviewed reported not having been in serious fights themselves (beyond name-calling and play fighting), they spoke about what they thought they would do in a situation if they felt they had to fight to protect themselves from bodily harm. Most reported that they would fight back.

If you're surrounded by other people that won't let you leave the circle and there are some people closing in on you and they start beating you, the school says 'sit there and take a beating, ... don't fight back'. I'd fight back. I'd rather not get hurt. So, if it's a matter of my pain and his pain, I don't think about his pain. (female "non-hitter")

In addition to protecting themselves from physical harm, students strive to avoid anything that might damage their reputation. Upholding one's reputation hinges upon being considered trustworthy (not a "rat"), and not too polite (not a "goodie-goodie"). The following exchange between the interviewer and a female student (female "non-hitter", p.21) reflects the views held by other students with respect to the importance of not being a "rat."

Interviewer: This is the one [scenario] about school property. Lise saw her friends vandalising the school and the principal asks her if she knows anything about it. Do you think Lise should tell?

Female "non-hitter": *I wouldn't. Uh, huh. Ratting. I would not do that to my friends.*

Interviewer: Yeah, okay. What if they weren't your friends?

Female "non-hitter": *No. Cause it gives you a reputation of being a rat. Nobody would trust you with anything. ... Everything here is about our reputation. If you have no reputation you don't have a life basically. No one knows who you are. Sometimes that's a good thing ... so they won't bug you as much. If they don't talk to you, no one will talk to you ...you just go on with your business. I guess you can get lonely sometimes.*

Interviewer: What does having a reputation mean?

Female "non-hitter": *That you're a somebody. You're noticed. ...Basically what you do and how you act is your reputation.*

Students also spoke about trying to determine who was at fault in their evaluations of student-to-student aggression. They deliberate about who "started" name-calling, fights, rumours, etc., and then use their understanding of a situation to determine their stance and make decisions about whether they should become involved in defending themselves or a friend. Deciding whether to step in to help someone else depends largely on whether you like the person, whether that other person is a friend or whether the situation was clearly unjust. As this female non-hitter told the interviewer, deciding whether to defend one's friend in a fight would depend upon:

...how it got started. If your friend started the whole thing then if they're starting to get hurt too much, then I step in and take them out [of the fight]. But if it's the other person who started it, I'd definitely get in there and defend my friend because I think right and wrong is in that factor. If it's my friend's fault then it's wrong to get in there. If it's the other guy's fault, then it's right to get in there.

Interviewer: What if you don't know whose fault it is?

Female student: *I'd defend my friend.*

Interviewer: What if it was somebody you didn't know?

Female student: *Well, if it was a gang beating like four people on one, I might step in, otherwise I'm not sure.*

Students also used their own knowledge of self and other to determine how they should engage with others; deciding who is more likely to pose a threat to their own wellbeing, and who is most likely to carry out a threat.

Cooperation

Questions about cooperation focused on working with other students on schoolwork in the classroom. With respect to working collaboratively, most students described preferring to work alone. However, students who reported finding it easier to get their work done if they worked alone also noted that working with others could have benefits like making new friends and learning from other people's ideas. Despite this, when students are given a choice, most said they would rather work by themselves because they often can't count on other people to do their share of the work.

Feeling encouraged and discouraged at school

Feeling encouraged at school has a lot to do with having connections to peers at school. It is closely tied to experiencing a sense of belonging and competence. Some students spoke about ways in which teachers help to encourage them at school, but most students held their peers primarily responsible for whether they felt they belonged at school.

If you don't have friends at school you're not going to feel like you belong. [Teachers] really don't pay attention, they just want us to get good grades and stuff. They say, 'You can come to us when you have problems' but they won't do anything, they won't help you at all, they just tell the principal. (female "non-hitter")

[Belonging means] having friends...if I don't have friends, I'll try to be small and insignificant so people don't notice me. But if I have friends I'll stand out because they're there. (female "non-hitter")

Students stated that they felt liked by teachers who encouraged them even when they weren't getting good marks, teachers who took a personal interest in their lives, and said that teachers demonstrated that they trusted students by asking them to help out in the classroom. With respect to feeling liked by peers, students reporting the importance of being evaluated favorably by others and having the sense that others wanted to be like you.

Interestingly, students' references to "participating in school" were restricted to classroom activities. Not one interviewee mentioned extra-curricular participation or the potential for students to participate in the school as a community beyond participating in structured activities such as the student council. A couple of students reported feeling satisfied with their ability to make suggestions for implementation in school, however, they noted that there were appropriate channels for sharing input; input was likely to be more effective if it was proposed by student council members or parents than if it was offered by individual students.

Several students reported feeling particularly discouraged by not having a say in decision-making, seeing teachers yell at students, not being encouraged to ask questions, and the frustration that arises because of overcrowding in the school.

Nobody listens, like the principals and stuff. [If we want something changed] they'd say 'there's nothing we can do about it, you can leave now.' You have no privileges in school, you can't do anything. ...Like there was this kid standing in the hallway drinking and the principal tells him to go sit down and there's no where to sit down because we don't have benches, you're not allowed to sit on the floor. (female "non-hitter")

I don't like the new school system. ... [You get] half an hour [to eat] and then half an hour to hang out with your friends. You used to be able to eat right at lunch, ... get your friends, hang out, eat wherever, outside, inside. [The change was intended] to get rid of the garbage that's outside, like in the halls and stuff. ... Teachers had a meeting, decided to change it and the kids just had to suck it up. (male "non-hitter")

People try and go to the vice-principal but he will say like, 'You have an attitude and I don't like it' and he won't change it. ... Half the rules that they set up for us don't apply to them [adults]. (female "non-hitter")

Teachers' yelling at students was the primary example given when students were asked how they could tell if a teacher didn't like a student.

Students' references to being able to ask questions were also restricted to the classroom. Many of the interviewees did not seem to comprehend the potential to ask questions beyond not understanding curriculum content in the classroom. Students reported feeling like they had little "voice" at school.

I don't really like to talk in class. None of my friends are in my class this year. ... I think it is [easier when your friends are with you] because if your friends are there you can have people that will back you up, but if you don't have your friends there, you can just have people that will laugh at you and say that your opinion sucks. (female "non-hitter")

Usually I'll ask [questions] but if I think it's a dumb question that the teacher has already explained it, like sometimes they rub it in like, 'Well, I explained it twice, why don't you get it! Were you listening!' (male "hitter")

Additionally, students spoke at length about the role that overcrowding⁵ in the school plays in facilitating aggressive behaviour among students. Many students reported feeling frustrated when they can't move through the hallways between classes

⁵ This school was built to accommodate 500 students and currently had a student body of 700 students in grades 7-9.

and often tempers flare; students resort to pushing and shoving and swearing at one another.

Discussion and Implication for School-Based Practice

This study was invited by school administrators who had concerns about aggression in their middle school. We found that just over 21% of male students and only 4% of female students had actually physically beaten up another student in the past year. Interviews revealed that male students frequently engage in play fights and therefore we should be careful about the attributions we make vis-à-vis aggressive behaviour within this school population. An analyses of sex differences in the use of physical, sexual, and relational forms of aggression showed that male students are more likely than female students to engage in all forms of aggression. Whether they use aggression or not, the students in the school seem to be aware of the culture of aggression within the school. The words of the students provide insight into the dynamic, context-dependent centre of their experiences and have highlighted the importance of attending to conditions within the school context in order to understand what influences behaviour.

Competition within the school milieu was a strong theme in students' interviews. The level of competition reported to exist within and between groups of students (e.g., males striving for dominance, male and female students seeking to obtain friends, and female students competing for boyfriends) supports contentions that competitive school climates interfere with students' abilities to communicate, form connections with others, and prompt students to express their own power and strength in efforts to achieve safety from aggression by others (Kohn, 2004; Pelligrini, 2002; Yamaguchi, 2001).

Consistent with the findings of Smith and Thomas (2000), students in this study spoke about engaging in aggressive behaviour as having instrumental value for achieving belonging and acceptance through dominance. Gaining acceptance by peers in the school followed stereotypical gender expectations: for males, respect was derived from displaying physical toughness; for females, respect was derived from physical attractiveness and verbal toughness. A couple of norms for gaining acceptance and avoiding victimization applied equally to both male and female students: looking after one's reputation (never ratting on your friends) and avoiding being seen as a too polite, "goodie-goodie."

The findings suggest that male students are more likely to feel pressure to conform to gender expectations that are not consistent with a peaceful existence in school (e.g., various forms of play fighting, engaging in overt attempts to achieve dominance) (Mills, 2001). Further, evidence exists to support the notion that males are taught through cultural norms to not expect to feel connected to others (i.e., males should be strong, independent, individuals who do not need others) (Garbarino, 1999; Pollack, 1998) and therefore may be a hard group to persuade that they are being denied a fundamental human need.

Students described belonging at school as arising from feeling cared about by friends and teachers. While peers were said to have the strongest influence on feelings of belonging, the role that teachers play in school belonging was also noted. The findings also highlight that students perceive their role within the school as generally restricted to classroom learning. Students reports of teachers yelling at disruptive students suggests that classroom control for the purpose of academic achievement was a high priority for teachers. Yelling at students models a lack of regard for students' feelings and validates a form of social rejection, and in this way, interferes with

students' ability to develop a socially interdependent consciousness (Beck & Malley, 1998; Chang, 2003; Öhrn, 2001; Roeser, et al., 2000).

Finally, school crowding prompted the imposition of a number of rules (e.g., shorter time for interaction over lunchtime to reduce garbage around the school; no carrying of drinks around the school to prevent bumping and spillage) intended to counter some of the effects of overcrowding (e.g., difficulties with student body movement, the volume of garbage, student safety). However, the imposition of rules without student consultation and participation in decision-making is another way that the school failed to give students experiences with autonomy and competence (Öhrn, 2001). When adults accuse students of having a bad attitude when they voice their concerns, students become at risk of disengaging from school (Baker & Bridger, 1997; Fallis & Opatow, 2003). Additionally, the size of the school inhibits students' ability to get to know one another well, without which, it becomes harder to learn to cooperate and experience a sense of interdependence (Riner & Saywell, 2002).

Because aggressive behaviour is often used to uphold social identities and perform role expectations, we must consider appropriate reform within the social culture within a school rather than focusing our attention on individual, "problematic" students. For example, when we overhear students speaking the language of aggression, we must be careful to not assume that their behaviour will reflect their talk and then premise our actions upon such an assumption. Practicing the discourse of aggression can help adolescents to negotiate their way within the culture. Speaking the language of violence is important to being seen as a competent youth, however, expressing an understanding of the culture of violence should not be construed as likely to translate into acts of violence (Morrill, Yalda, Adelman, Musheno, & Bejarano, 2000).

The need to assert dominance was a strong theme in the interviews. Both male and female students participate in asserting dominance, although males tend to engage in asserting their physical dominance more than females. Efforts to deconstruct dominant masculinity (i.e., there is only one way to be a man), including the ways in which females participate to uphold this type of masculinity, in addition to increasing student participation and voice within the school would help the school to develop a caring learning culture. A pervasive association exists between upholding hegemonic masculinity and the use of violence (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997), but schools have the power to disrupt it by working towards constructing multiple masculinities (i.e., there are many ways to be 'masculine' and 'feminine;' recognition of the fact that gender stereotypes restrict people from being fully "human") (Martino, 1997; Mills, 2001; Ogilvie, 1996).

It is also very important for schools to question their institutionalized responses to aggressive behaviour. It is important to engage in effective prevention but it is also important to stay away from simply punishing the aggressor as this reinforces student perceptions about the importance of asserting and maintaining dominance over others. Students who are aggressors and victims require support to heal their experiences of victimization (CAEFS, n.d.). Gaarder and Belknap (2002) found that delinquent girls had experiences in schools that reinforced feelings of isolation and oppression. They were not offered assistance or support for their problems, including their experiences with being victimized by others, but were dealt harshly for their offenses against others.

Conflict resolution training could help both staff and students. Exercises on how to assertively express one's needs would help adults within the school move away from ineffectual punitive practices that model aggressive behaviour. Similarly, the

acquisition of conflict resolution skills would help students learn that options exist between 'doing nothing' and using aggression when one is faced with conflict.

This needs-based exploration of aggressive behaviour in a middle school has highlighted a number of important issues that need to be taken into consideration in efforts to construct a pathway to a healthier school environment in which students can explore risk-taking in learning, experience social interdependence, and, hopefully, meet their developmental needs for belonging, autonomy, and competence.

Table 1. *Proportion of Hitters and Non-hitters*

	"Hitters"	"Non-hitters"	
Males	n = 27	n = 45	n = 72
	(37.5% of males)	(62.5% of males)	
	(21.6% of whole sample)	(36% of whole sample)	
Females	n = 5	n = 48	n = 53
	(9.4% of females)	(90.6% of females)	
	(4% of whole sample)	(38.4% of whole sample)	
	n = 32	n = 92	
	(25.6%)	(73.6%)	

Table 2. *Mean Scores of Three Forms of Aggression for Male and Female Students*

	Males (n=74) Mean Response	Females (n=53) Mean Response
Physical Aggression	.637***	.359***
Relational Aggression	.339	.185**
Sexual Aggression/Harassment	.264***	.126***

t-test significant sex differences: *p < .05, **p < .01, *** p < .001

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A Socio -Economic, Demographic and Academic Profile of First Year Students
Entering Seven Institutes of Technology in Ireland

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Introduction

A substantial body of research exists which seeks to examine the individual, social and institutional factors that impact on third level student performance and retention (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1980; Johnes, 1990b; Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). These and other publications suggest that there are a large number of interacting variables personal, social and academic which have an impact on student success and persistence.

This study investigates the characteristics of 578 computing students entering the first year of their programme in the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland in 2001. The study is longitudinal with interlinking qualitative and quantitative elements and spans the four years of the students' academic life. It is envisioned that findings from this study will seek to establish the possibility of identifying particular profiles of students and their likelihood of success in their third level course. The purpose of this paper is to present a profile of the student cohort based on the questionnaire administered to them on entry to their first year